

## Three Remedies for Discouragement Ecclesiastes 7:8-10

By Phillip G. Kayser at DCC on 1-1-2012

### Introduction

A Man approached a little league baseball game one afternoon. He asked a boy in the dugout what the score was. The boy responded, “Eighteen to nothing—we’re behind.” “Boy,” said the spectator, “I’ll be you’re discouraged.”

“Why should I be discouraged?” replied the little boy. “We haven’t even gotten to bat yet.”

Now that’s an interesting perspective. There are a lot of reasons why people get discouraged. They can get discouraged by their past. They have maybe blown it so badly, or their parents have blown it so badly that they feel like they have a ball and chain tied to their leg. And we will be seeing that the past does need not determine your future. Paul says that God can provide a way of escape so that you may be able to bear it.

Others are discouraged over the present. They think that things are so bad in America that they want to throw up their hands. They think it is too late to fix anything. But the city of Nineveh would remind you that God can change the present situation so radically that everyone is given a new lease on life. Don’t be discouraged over the present.

Others are discouraged by their perception of the future. They are so badly in debt that their future looks bleak; or they have such a pessimistic eschatology that they have absolutely no faith in God’s promises for the future. But even one of the thieves on the cross had his view of the future turned upside down as he asked Jesus to remember him when He entered His kingdom.

As we will be seeing today, it is not how bad the past, present, or future might be that determines whether we get discouraged or not. It is our *view* of the past, present, and future that gives us faith or that makes us discouraged. And this morning I hope that our viewpoint will be transformed by what *God* says about our past, present, and future. These are three remedies to discouragement.

## I. Be Driven By The Future (v. 8)

The first thing that I want to encourage you to do is to be driven by the future. Look at verse 8. Solomon said, **“The end of a thing is better than its beginning.”** How much time do we spend looking at the end that God has in view? How much time do we spend on goals? How much are we driven by the promises of God for our individual future? There is a sense in which our personal eschatology and cosmic eschatology gives a profound encouragement to those who want to give up.

Let me explain the meaning of that term “end.” The theologian, Gerhardus Vos in his *Pauline Eschatology* does a seven-page word study of this Hebrew word and shows that it has the meaning of outcome, end product, or the goal being aimed at. Solomon is saying that we ought to consider the end-result or the goal we are shooting towards as being far more important than the decisions that go up to that end.

Solomon does not deny the importance of *starting* projects, but he says that by comparison of two good and essential things, determining the end is far more important than beginning a project. This means planning, pure and simple. Sorry folks; if you don't like planning, this first point is not going to be a pleasant point. Those who are driven by the tyranny of the urgent are constantly preoccupied with beginnings. Isn't that true? “I've got to get started on project A. Project B is about to begin. This is pressing. That is urgent.” And then somebody else calls on the line and wants you to do something, and your kids are pulling at your apron strings. Such people often get urgent things done at the expense of the really important things because the important things are farther off in terms of pressure. I tend to fall into this sometimes. It's been a temptation this past week to allow the tyranny of the urgent to dictate my schedule. And when we do this, often a part of the problem is a failure to think about the end or the goal.

The same Hebrew word is used in Proverbs 14:12 where Solomon says, **“There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.”** The beginning of many paths seems sweet and easy. In fact, most sins are that way. That's why they are tempting. Proverbs 1 shows how tempting theft can be, but he paints for us a picture of the kind of misery a person will have down the road. Proverbs does the same thing with the perils of adultery. It says, **“For the lips of an immoral woman drip honey, and her mouth is smoother than oil; but in the end she is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword. Her feet go down to death, her steps lay hold of hell...”** That's an eschatology of sin, right? It is showing

you what the end result of sin will be. And in that passage Solomon goes on to paint a picture so horrible, that if an adulterer had clearly seen the end, he would never have started with the beginning of the sin. He would have been revolted by the sin, even at the beginning. But the problem is that the beginnings are deceptive. They don't look anything like the end. To the degree that we give in to sin, to that degree we are present oriented rather than future oriented.

And beginnings aren't deceptive just for evil. They are deceptive even for what is good. It seems like such a waste to throw perfectly good grain into the ground, but the farmer knows that the end result will be a harvest. When my brother was doing relief supply during a famine in Ethiopia, they gave plenty of food and plenty of seed grain to plant for the next harvest. But there were people who gorged on seed corn and had nothing left over for planting the next year. That was a failure to take this phrase seriously.

On the other hand, if we have considered the end (or the goal) by means of planning, we might not even begin a project that we know we can't finish. That was Christ's point in Luke 13 in the parable of the man who started to build a tower, but ran out of resources and couldn't finish it. You can see on even something as mundane as that, the end that you are planning for is more important than the beginning. Because we are limited creatures, we need to decide which projects we will begin, but we can't decide that until we have done the necessary planning to determine the end results that we want for our labors.

For every project you are engaged in, you should be able to articulate your reason for doing it: the goal that you have in mind; or as Solomon says, **“the end of the thing.”** Edward Dayton said, “If you don't care where you are going, any road will get you there, and it really doesn't make any difference how much time you take.” For those of you who are driven by the present, you really need to start breaking out of that cycle by doing some planning.

Of course, that takes patience, doesn't it? The second phrase in verse 8 says, **“The patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit.”** To be future oriented takes patience, especially if you are planning for your great grandchildren as the Bible commands. It also gives humility because you realize that there are numerous things that still need to be done. Those who are driven by the past or by the present are often proud in spirit because they are not preoccupied with what *could* be accomplished, but rather are

preoccupied with what *has* been accomplished. Do you see how those two phrases in verse 8 tie together?

Americans are becoming increasingly present oriented. We don't care about the past or about the future. We are spending our future, our children's future, and with the trillions of dollars of debt, even our grandchildren's future. Credit card purchases, loans and national debt are all testimony to the fact that we are not driven by the future. We live in the present and we want our comforts now.

Let me tell you the benefits of treating the end as more important than the beginning. First, those who do the necessary planning to have the end in mind get more accomplished and can do it with more ease of mind, and it gives them a sense of satisfaction and purpose in life. It also helps them to realize what progress they have made each year and the changes that need to be made to correct any deficiencies. There are all kinds of benefits. They know where they are going.

*Now in contrast*, those who are always preoccupied with a new series of beginnings that have been imposed upon them feel like they are in a rat race - constantly running from one meaningless project to another - and they don't know where they are headed or why they are headed there. Those of you who are not involved in long term planning have probably experienced Ecclesiastes' theme verse - vanity of vanities, all is vanity. You see, Solomon doesn't care how many neat projects you have *begun*. His question is, "What is your purpose or end in doing that? What is the end goal that will be achieved?" Would you be able to give him an answer?

Now in doing this, we are simply imitating God. God had a plan before the foundation of the world, and all of his decrees are goals leading up to the final goal of the plan. This means that God's actions are driven by the future. This is simply eschatology. Now, most evangelical's current eschatology has no cohesion between future, present, and past. Most Christians are so pessimistic about the future of this world that they have this upside down. They don't see all of history as part of God's plan to build a glorious future for planet earth. In their eschatology the end is worse than the beginning. Right? And it's no wonder that they get discouraged.

Before we leave point I, let me contrast one other way that people find themselves driven. We've already shown how being driven by the present can lead to a rat race. But being driven by the past can be a problem as well. Most modern forms of psychology and philosophy say that we are driven by and even determined by our past. There are a couple forms that say we are

driven by the present. For example, Ego Psychology says that we are driven by present needs and Social Psychology says that we are being shaped by present and past social pressures. But most psychologies say that we are determined by our past. Think of the impact of B.F. Skinner, who taught what is called behaviorism or environmental determinism. He said that the environment that you grew up in totally determines your behavior. He thought that you are like a rat who has been conditioned. On his view, the abuse you received as a child guarantees your current behavior. But the Bible rejects that. Jesus said, “If the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed” (John 8:36).

Or think of Freud who taught psychological determinism based on the interplay of desire and social pressures when you were raised. He said that even the way you were potty-trained determined your future.

Or think of Montesquieu, who taught geographic determinism. He said that the geography around you determines your future. And there are some in the Social Sciences who still say that. You live in the Ghetto and you can't help your behavior. That is geographic determinism. And there are many other examples where people think that the past determines the future.

Now Christians may not have bought into one of those systems of thought (at least self-consciously), but many times people allow their past mistakes (for example) to determine their future. They are so overwhelmed by something awful they did, that they are constantly cringing over the past and not dealing with the present. Or they are so bitter over something awful that happened to them that the bitterness ruins everything they do. That is allowing your past to drive your future. God's grace powerfully changes all of that.

Paul was one of those people who could have been so ashamed about his murder of Christians in the past, that he could have stayed out of leadership and stayed hidden from criticism. But in Philippians 3 he says he learned to be driven by the future and not the past. He said, “**Brethren, I do not count myself to have laid hold of it; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Therefore, let us, as many as are mature, have this mind...**” Perhaps you have been caught in bondage to some sexual sin. You don't have to be caught in that forever. 1 Corinthians 6:11 can be your theme verse. That verse speaks of various forms of sexual bondage and says, “**Such were some of you, but you were washed.**” The Gospel not only

calls us sinners to repentance, but it calls us to faith – to believe that God’s grace is sufficient for everything we have said and done – everything.

And this is true not just for our individual lives, but also for our approach to history. Many people approach history and social issues in a pagan way and are discouraged about the future of America because of the deterioration of the past 100 years. But God commands us to not be historical determinists, but eschatological determinists. That’s just a fancy way of saying that the future determines history because history is His Story - it is the outworking of His plan.

Think of a sculptor. He takes an ugly stone and turns it into a beautiful statue. How does he do that? By having the end in his mind. Somebody looked at Mount Rushmore and he could see some faces there in the future, and knew just what rock to blast out to make it so. So just imagine an artist making a horse out of a block of stone. Little by little he is chipping away at the things that he does not want in the stone and leaving the things that he does want, and always with the final product in His mind's eye. And *every* chip of his chisel is determined by that final goal he has in mind. So too every chip that God makes upon us in time and history is determined by the future (what He sees the image is *going* to look like), not by the past. The final picture that God has in His mind for you is conformity to the image of Christ. Thus eschatology is not the running down of a clock that was wound up. Eschatology is not history deteriorating into chaos as many Christians like to present it. But rather, eschatology is the plan God had in mind for the world and all that is in it. Every event of history has in some way contributed to the final picture that God is drawing. God is in control of history, not Satan, and eschatology is merely the outworking of His plan for the ages. Acts says, “**known unto God from the foundation of the world are all His works**” (Acts 15:18). In other words, He has a plan. And Acts 17:26 says that God has determined the times before appointed. God’s plan for our future is what determines what we can do today. We are predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son. The Great Commission has been predestined to be fulfilled where all nations are Christian nations observing everything that Christ has taught. That’s the end that he had in mind. And just because the nations look more like the first picture of Rushmore in your outlines (an ugly mountain) does not mean that the Great Commission will not be fulfilled.

And so if we are to imitate God, we must be future oriented and patiently implement our plans for the generations to come. “**The end of a thing is better than its beginning, and the patient in spirit is better than**

**the proud in spirit.**” He wants us to have progress in history. He also wants us to be humble, knowing that every one of us still has a long ways to go. As one person worded it, “Be patient; God is not finished with me yet.” God is driven by His future goals and He wants us to be driven by the future. Now, I have spent a long time on this first point, but I think it is important that we understand it.

## II. Be Self-Controlled In The Present (vv. 8b-9)

Point II is basically affirming that it not enough to be driven by and excited by the future. We must also be self-controlled in the present. I remember watching a teenager putting together a balsa wood airplane. He knew what he wanted; he was following the plans or directions and to that degree he was being driven by the future. But the pieces just didn’t seem to be going together very well. He got so frustrated at one point that in a temper he smashed the plane to smithereens with his fist. He didn’t have the self-control needed to put that airplane together.

It’s not enough to be driven by the future; we must also exercise self-control in the present. And this is where many people break their New Year’s resolutions. They lack patience, self-control and self-discipline. So let’s read the second half of verse 8 and verse 9. **“The patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit. Do not hasten with your spirit to be angry, for anger rests in the bosom of fools.”** The commentary says that this can be translated as exasperation. I did a word search in the Hebrew and here are the ways this word is translated in *other* passages. It is translated as to dread something in Deut. 32:27. Hannah was irritated by her rival in 1 Samuel 1:6, so irritation is an appropriate translation. It is translated as anguish of heart in 1 Sam. 1:16, as an angry woman in Proverbs 21:19, as grief that a fatherless and victim has when they are taken advantage of in Psalm 10:14, as vexation over not getting one’s way in Psalm 122:10 and as annoyance in Proverbs 12:16. The common thread in all the passages is a person getting bent out of shape in some way - losing self-control, either by being frustrated, irritated, angry, annoyed, being vexed or even dreading something.

Have any of those things happened to you this past week? Do you quit exercising because the discomfort annoys you? I’ll have to admit that I am not as consistent at exercise as I would like to be. I would like to change that. Have you given up patiently discipling a child in a given project because you are frustrated? Or maybe like the teenager who was putting together that airplane, you are vexed with how long and how hard it is taking

to achieve your goals and so you want to give up. In fact, that's a good word picture.

Now He doesn't say that you can't get angry, annoyed or bent out of shape. He says, "**do not hasten in your spirit to be angry.**" That means that there are times when being annoyed is appropriate. There are at least a couple of times when this word is used of God. But when this anger, frustration or however you want to translate it rests in your bosom, in other words, when it is always just under the surface, there is a fundamental problem of self-control that needs to be addressed. When you can handle frustrations without getting frustrated; when you can handle irritations, without getting irritated, when you can handle annoyances without getting annoyed – Wow! You have matured a great deal in Christ.

In the passages I cited where this word is used, the frustration tempts people to quit because the circumstances are so difficult. In the first passage the person dreaded doing something because of taunts. In the second passage a person wanted to avoid an individual because of irritation. In another passage the people give up because of frustration. Every one of those situations had circumstances that were tempting them to abandon their future goals. Now if you are driven by the present, you will take the easy way out.

Without self-discipline all the planning in the world will not help. The Bible gives many lessons on how to learn self-control. There are just hints of it here. The word "fool" means a person who is not controlled by the Spirit - an unbeliever. When we act, talk and think like unbelievers, we will not have spiritual self-control. But points I & III are also connected. All these points hang or fall together. Without being driven by the future we will never have a reason to be self-controlled in the present. If we are unrealistic about the past, we will be demotivated in the present.

### **III. Be Realistic About The Past (v. 10)**

So point III is "Be realistic about the past." Look at verse 10. "**Do not say, 'Why were the former days better than these?' For you do not inquire wisely concerning this.**" This may be counter-intuitive. Why would saying that the past is better a denial of God's wisdom? I think there are at least two reasons. First, it is a denial of the Biblical doctrine of progress. Let me explain. If the former days are better than today in an absolute sense, that means that history is going downhill, right? And if history is progressively getting worse and worse, then it destroys our motivation to be self-controlled today (because what difference are we going to make anyway



with our hard labors and efforts). And so it rules out point II. And it flies in the face of point I since it demotivates us from being future oriented. Psychologically it makes people feel like their labors in the Lord *are* in vain. So Solomon says, **“Do not say, ‘Why were the former days better than these?’ For you do not inquire wisely concerning this.”**

Now it takes faith to believe that. It takes faith to believe in sustained, compounded growth, whether you are talking about compounded growth of money, or compounded growth of the kingdom. It takes faith to believe in the progress of our own sanctification. But whether you are dealing with history or with personal ethics, Scripture promises the opposite of this pessimistic saying over and over again. Isaiah 9 says of Christ’s kingdom that from the time He was born, **“Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end from that time forward, even forever.”** That’s incredible. That’s compounded growth of His kingdom; never-ending growth. It’s promising progress or increase from that time forward and forever. So that’s another rebuke to those who say, “The former days were better than these.” Now certainly there are ups and downs in various slices of life from one generation to another, but God promises that the overall thrust of His kingdom will be upward bound.

Daniel showed the kingdom, which came in the days of Rome, to be a little stone that grows into a great mountain and eventually fills the whole earth. Ezekiel explained the progress of history as a trickle that came from the temple and grew large and larger until it filled the whole earth. Zechariah spoke of the growth of wisdom and righteousness finally being so deep that he compares that to the depth of the oceans. Christ said the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which begins smaller than any other herb in the garden and grows into the greatest herb dominating all other herbs. He likened it to leaven, which finally leavens the whole lump of dough. The doctrine of the progress of history is pervasive in Scripture, and it is a rebuke to any eschatology that complains “Why were the former days better than these?” These three points all hang together. You can’t have any one of them without all three of them. If the end is better than the beginning, then the former days can’t be better than these, and that means that the last verse of 1 Corinthians 15 is true. That verse says, **“Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.”** We can patiently persevere (that’s point II) because points I and III are true.

But it’s also a rebuke to those who retreat from culture. Many Christians are paralyzed when it comes to changing culture. They think

changing America is a hopeless cause, so their social action *only* amounts to a prophetic critique of culture. They don't have anything positive to replace it with. Now critiques are important. I think we do need to be a prophetic voice at the abortion clinic, and we do need to oppose pornography and other evils. But if our focus is only to stand in front of the garbage pile and speak against it, we will lose sight of the awesome vision of building the city of God. America needs to know where it has gone wrong, but if we give no hope about where America could be or about God's plans for the future, we demoralize the people. And there are too many Christian social critics who are constantly saying, "Why were the former days better than these?" They totally ignore the biblical doctrine that God brings even greater victories out of the apparent defeats and catastrophes of history. Are you a historical pessimist? Or are you a culture changer?

But there are other ways in which our views of the past can demoralize us in the present. When we constantly revel in our past accomplishments we lose motivation for accomplishing much of anything today. We are tempted to think that we have done our fair share of the work and to sit back and relax. It's proper to evaluate the past, but we must not make a god out of the past, whether that past is our own life, the family heritage or America's early history. There are lots of Christians who wish they could go back in time and live in early America. Maturity calls us to stop such pining over the past and begin the hard work to make the future better than the past. America's founding fathers made mistakes. I think they happened to do a better job than any other country ever has, but the doctrine of historical progress means that we can't be satisfied with that. We need to be willing to critique what they did wrong, appreciate what they did right and then get about the work of gratefully standing on their shoulders so that our generation or at least the next generation can climb higher.

Let me make one more application. Constantly implying that you did things better than your kids do, may or may not be true, but it demoralizes. Solomon says, "**Do not say, 'Why were the former days better than these?' For you do not inquire wisely concerning this.**" Even if they are better, they *shouldn't* be better. You can motivate your children to excellence by realistically pointing out your own mistakes and by encouraging your kids to believe that by God's grace they can do even better than you did because they don't have to reinvent the wheel. Can you imagine not having computers? I really don't want to go back in time. History is helpful when we can learn from it. But when we set up history as a sacred tradition that we dare not improve on, we discourage progress. In

Shakespeare's play, *The Tempest*, Antonio said, "What's past is prologue." *What's past is prologue*. In other words, we need the past, and we can value the past, but let's get on with the story. Let's not stay in the prologue forever.

Scattered throughout the book of Ecclesiastes are Solomon's pleadings with his generation to avoid the vanity and vexation of spirit that can so easily keep us from glorifying God and enjoying Him. This paragraph is one of those exhortations. And so I ask you for 2012 to be driven by the future, self-controlled in the present, and realistic about the past. It will spare you a lot of discouragement. Amen.

# Youth Notes

Draw a picture of the sermon

Word checklist: check words off as Pastor Kayser says them.

- discouraged
- past
- present
- future
- end
- beginning
- eschatology
- planning
- consequences
- deceptive
- patience
- goals
- vanity
- determinism
- deterioration
- frustration
- irritated
- vexed
- realistic
- driven

Things I need to do:

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Try the following wordsearch puzzle. All answers are to the right.

B	E	G	I	N	N	I	N	G	Q	Z	K	B	Q	S	T	G	S	H	A	Z	Q	M	D	M
R	I	B	S	M	O	V	Y	P	C	Z	E	Y	A	W	U	T	L	M	T	P	U	D	V	A
Y	D	Y	S	E	Q	U	Q	O	D	P	T	D	R	N	J	U	I	B	Y	A	J	W	G	E
D	Y	R	W	M	I	N	G	M	W	B	Y	X	O	C	S	Y	X	G	Q	L	L	T	V	C
I	S	Z	I	Y	G	W	U	T	Y	P	S	I	F	R	U	S	T	R	A	T	I	O	N	O
S	K	A	S	V	N	X	B	D	Y	Z	T	Z	R	M	J	M	B	W	U	Y	F	U	W	N
C	Y	V	E	F	E	N	X	P	Z	A	I	R	E	A	L	I	S	T	I	C	N	D	Q	S
O	S	N	D	S	W	N	W	A	R	M	E	D	E	T	E	R	M	I	N	I	S	M	S	E
U	U	P	Q	W	C	X	K	O	U	E	P	E	A	H	C	B	P	E	Y	F	W	R	S	Q
R	Y	C	Z	I	E	H	I	I	F	B	S	A	I	G	U	B	J	L	Q	O	P	A	S	U
A	M	X	S	Z	S	R	A	W	S	Y	V	E	S	I	R	R	I	T	A	T	E	D	M	E
G	C	B	Z	E	E	I	S	T	Q	W	R	U	N	T	V	U	E	Q	K	N	J	Q	G	N
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D	G	J	E	F	U	T	U	R	E	L	U	G	A	G	J	S	H	F	N	N	T	I	U	E
P	N	D	L	B	E	N	D	Y	P	V	O	G	O	A	L	S	U	T	H	G	R	U	N	S
Q	L	D	E	C	E	P	T	I	V	E	F	G	T	B	P	A	T	I	E	N	C	E	B	G
L	V	A	N	I	T	Y	W	O	Z	D	C	P	Y	J	N	J	N	U	V	E	X	E	D	L

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